



Review: “In the Heights” one of the boldest and best produced musicals of the year



Diego Klock-Perez steals the show as Usnavi in the brilliant *In the Heights*. (Photos by Chris Bartelski)

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Long before his *Hamilton* had become one of the most celebrated — and influential — musicals in history, Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *In the Heights* had already made him a Broadway darling. This earlier work won four Tony Awards back in 2008 (including one for Best Musical) and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. Now that the show has toured around the country, it has found a perfect home at the Aurora Theatre in a collaboration with Theatrical Outfit. Now running through

August 28 at Aurora and then September 8-18 at the Rialto Center for the Arts downtown, *In the Heights* is an assured and supremely entertaining few hours of musical theater.

It's clearly very personal work for Miranda — and the performers here eat up the material. It's the hottest day of the year and the characters are going about their day-to-day activity. Usnavi (Diego Klock-Perez) runs a small grocery store in Washington Heights. Named after a ship with the sign "U.S. Navy" on it by his (now deceased) parents, he fantasizes of one day returning to the Dominican Republic, where he was born. In the interim, he is in love with Vanessa (Julissa Sabino), who works in the salon across the street but dreams of her own escape — getting her own apartment downtown.



Julissa Sabino brings energy and nuance to her role.

On this day, Nina Rosario (Diany Rodriguez) is back from her freshman year at Stanford University. She is the first in her family to go to college. It has not gone as well as she had envisioned, however, and she dreads having to tell her parents Kevin and Camila (Anthony Rodriguez and María Rodriguez-Sager). The family doesn't react well either at the romantic feelings she has developed for non-Hispanic Benny (Garrett Turner), who works for Kevin.

Other regulars in the neighborhood include Abuela Claudia (Felicia Hernandez) who is something of a grandmother figure to everyone in the neighborhood; Daniela (Lilliangina Quiñones) who owns the salon Vanessa works at; Piragua Guy (Juan Carlos Unzueta); and Sonny (Christian Magby) Usnavi's cousin keen on social justice.

This production of *In the Heights* is alive from its first few seconds and pretty much stays in that zone until the end. As directed by Justin Anderson, the musical is full of life, authenticity and hope.

Its ensemble is large and impressive, from the main characters to the smaller roles. Both Sabino and Diany Rodriguez are among the most talented musical performers around, and they bring personality and musicality to their individual roles. Anthony Rodriguez and Rodriguez-Sager are convincing as Nina's parents, and Hernandez, Quiñones, Unzueta and Turner also shine. As terrific as they all are, though, the musical is dominated by Klock-Perez, who also played Usnavi at SpeakEasy Stage Company in Boston. He is extraordinary in the main role, charismatic and able to handle the versatile, word-heavy score with ease.

Behind the scenes, Anderson has become almost a sure bet these days. No one else in town can produce a play as dramatic as Horizon Theatre's *The City of Conversation* and then turn around and stage a musical like this. He brings out expert work from everyone. He and choreographer Ricardo Aponte handle the musical's movement crisply and inventively.

If *In the Heights* has a slight weakness, it's the book. While Miranda has handled the score, the book — by Quiara Alegría Hudes — tries to pack in a bit too many characters and tie everything up with a ribbon. To her credit, however, after a first act that seems a bit light, the second really finds its grounding. It becomes a paean to family and home — and a deeply emotional one at that.



Joseph Pendergrast adds a break dance to the musical.

In a bigger setting, the intimacy of the characters could easily get lost. The Aurora stage is ideal for this show, which has a wonderful sense of place, abetted by Shannon Robert's distinctive Washington Heights set.

The score, complete with hip hop and salsa, is full of some beautiful songs, such as "Alabanza," after tragedy has struck. "Carnaval del Barrio," led by most of the company, is one of the most joyous production numbers I've seen in ages. As always, music director Ann-Carol Pence and her seven-person orchestra deliver with the musical numbers.

It's been a great year for Atlanta musicals, with the likes of Aurora's *Into the Woods*, Horizon's *The Toxic Avenger*, Theatrical Outfit's *The Light in the Piazza* and Serenbe Playhouse's current, boldly staged *Miss Saigon*. Yet this is as strong of a musical as this season has produced.

As someone who adored the Aurora Theatre/Theatrical Outfit take of *Memphis* last year, I didn't think the companies could come together and match that level of sheer energy and passion again. Color me wrong — happily.